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Viet Prisoner-Rescue Unit to Be Disbanded

Fate of Secret Squad Parallels That of Other Clandestine Operations in S.E. Asia

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SAIGON—A secret command of American soldiers specially trained for prisoner rescue raids in hostile territory is scheduled to be disbanded some time this month.

According to an officer long involved in clandestine operations, the move will take from the U.S. command in South Vietnam its last cloak-and-dagger outfit specifically honed to fight its way in and out of prisoner camps.

(The secret unit being disbanded was trained for use in the jungles of South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and not for such spectaculairs as the unsuccessful raid on Son Tay in North Vietnam in November, 1970.)

Scattered Around

Though there are plenty of toughly skilled Americans in South Vietnam to mount such raids if the chance arises, they are scattered among many units. There are also small outfits — like Navy seal teams—available for such things, but they are not specifically trained and kept in readiness for prisoner rescue grabs.

Consequently the stand-down of the secret prisoner rescue group has stirred heated words within the headquarters of U.S. Gen. Creighton W. Abrams.

Abrams, who has an ill-concealed suspicion of the value of elite units superimposed on the Army's regular structure, has reportedly resisted arguments to go lightly on the withdrawal of such outfits.

Since the prisoner rescue unit was formed after the big American troop withdrawal in 1965-66 it has not succeeded in res-

cuing a single American prisoner held by the Viet Cong, though it has helped snatch a small number of South Vietnamese captives from jungle camps.

The unit had a parallel mission of saving downed pilots in cases where ground commandos might be required in addition to the crews of Air Force rescue helicopters known as Jolly Green Giants. If any such operation was ever mounted it has not been revealed. Some officers hint, however, that some operations of this type took place.

Not Many Captives

One reason the unit has few successes to its credit is that it was used sparingly and under the strictest limitations. To avoid endangering the lives of any captives with "fishing expeditions," special raids were ordered only when intelligence turned up hard and immediate information on the location of Viet Cong POW camps. Thus, while the unit had few successes it could equally boast few failures in the sense of botched or sloppy efforts.

The number of American captives in Viet Cong camps is also very small. Casualty figures list 463 Americans missing in South Vietnam. The United States claims 78 of these were known from various sources to have been alive at the time of their capture and were consequently listed as war prisoners. Of these, however, only 20 have been acknowledged by Viet Cong propaganda

special prisoner-rescue commando of a relative handful of men is therefore small in the face of the overall troop withdrawal demands—the U.S. force level is now 127,000 men and the current goal is 69,000 by May 1.

The withdrawal, however, underscores the unpublicized decline in all clandestine operations which has paralleled the pullout of regular troops.

CIA Cutback

This actually began about 1969 when the Central Intelligence Agency began to sharply trim its involvement in many programs. Part of this was caused by Abrams, who disliked having Army types under CIA command as was the case in several areas. At any rate, the CIA began to withdraw provincial agents from the Phoenix program—aimed at rooting out and killing Viet Cong "Phantom government" officials—and quit funding (and controlling) such programs as the training school at Vung Tau which turned out government Revolutionary Development cadre.

Though the CIA's tentacles still reach all the sensitive areas of control in South Vietnam, the emphasis now is less on "operational" areas and more on pure intelligence gathering.

Paralleling the CIA's appreciably lower silhouette, the Green Beret troopers of the 5th Special Forces Group were pulled out a year ago—their clandestine operations being absorbed by an outfit known as SOG—the Studies and Observations Group. SOG is a cloak-and-dagger grabbag at Abrams' headquarters, incorporating a dozen or so outfits which do everything from super-secret long-range patrols to analyzing documents and interrogating top-rank prisoners.

Less Visible

The operations of SOG are noticeably less visible today than they were a few years ago when a subsidiary unit known as the B-57 Detachment precipitated what became known as the Green Beret case. That case — which involved the execution of a suspected double agent — blew the cover on how extensive clandestine operations had grown in South Vietnam. It also caused a number of heads to roll within the U.S. establishment and resulted in a general hunkering down of cloak-and-dagger types.

Military spokesmen say that a number of SOG personnel have been dribbling out for several months. Its future will probably be sharply diminished within the next several months when the troop withdrawal program enters its final phase.

Paralleling these declines in the "secret war" is the increased use of sensors and computers requiring fewer men in the field and more brainpower at headquarters.

Long-range patrols into Cambodia, Laos and even North Vietnam have been virtually eliminated by the seeding of the Ho Chi Minh Trail with electronic sensors. Much of the computerized analysis on the readouts from these sensors is now done from a secret Air Force establishment in Thailand and not in South Vietnam (though the results are still channeled into 7th Air Force headquarters at Tan Son Nhut where the air war continues to be run).

While clandestine operations on the ground have lessened, the Air Force has also cut the number of planes that were part of the "secret war." These planes were in conglomerate outfits known as special operations squadrons. They included everything from helicopters for dropping penetration agents to radio-packed executive jets equipped to pick up agents deep in enemy land. The squadrons also